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## Stress Is Your Body's Reaction to a Stimulus

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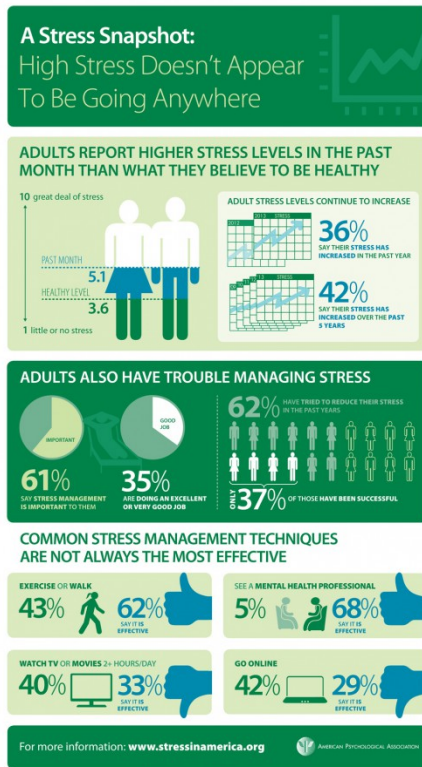
*By Cmdr. John Brooks, M.D., Lovell Federal Health Care Center*



Stress is simply your body's reaction to a stimulus and it is present in our everyday lives. The stimulus can be an event that is either good or bad; it can be real or perceived; and it can range in severity from mild to major or even traumatic. Stress is so prevalent in our society that according to an [American Psychological Association](#) survey, about one-fourth of Americans rate their stress level as 8 or more on a 10-point scale.

Stress can affect your health, thoughts, emotions, sleep, diet, and behavior even though you may not realize it. These affects are caused by your body's own hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. An acute stress that is mild and of short duration can be beneficial. This is part of the "fight or flight" response in which you tend to be more alert and active during this time. However, long lasting stress is called chronic stress. Chronic stress can cause long term health problems such as high blood pressure, heart disease, weight control issues, sleep disruption, depression, anxiety, and decreased immune system function to name just a few.

The effects of stress on your body build up slowly over time. Because these changes are subtle, you may not even notice they are occurring. You may even think you are "off" or your symptoms are due to an illness. The [National Institute of Mental Health](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/) offers these tips that may help you cope with stress:



- Seek help from a qualified mental health care provider if you are overwhelmed, feel you cannot cope, have suicidal thoughts, or are using drugs or alcohol to cope.
- Get proper health care for existing or new health problems.
- Stay in touch with people who can provide emotional and other support. Ask for help from friends, family, and community or religious organizations to reduce stress due to work burdens or family issues, such as caring for a loved one.
- Recognize signs of your body's response to stress, such as difficulty sleeping, increased alcohol and other substance use, being easily angered, feeling depressed, and having low energy.
- Set priorities-decide what must get done and what can wait, and learn to say no to new tasks if they are putting you into overload.
- Note what you have accomplished at the end of the day, not what you have been unable to do.
- Avoid dwelling on problems. If you can't do this on your own, seek help from a qualified mental

health professional who can guide you.

- Exercise regularly-just 30 minutes per day of gentle walking can help boost mood and reduce stress.
- Schedule regular times for healthy and relaxing activities.
- Explore stress coping programs, which may incorporate meditation, yoga, tai chi, or other gentle exercises.

If you or someone you know is overwhelmed by stress, ask for help from a health professional. If you or someone close to you is in crisis, call the toll-free, 24-hour [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/stress/index.shtml) at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255).

Additional information can be found at: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/stress/index.shtml>

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